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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 9322
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE
RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH 6650
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 JEDDAH 000470

SIPDIS

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RIYADH, PLEASE PASS TO DHAHRAN; DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP,
INR/B, NEA/FO PLEASE PASS TO ERIN WALSH, S/GAC FOR DR. MARK
DYBUL AND AMBASSADOR JIMMY KOLKER, R/FO PLEASE PASS TO
BARBARA GOERGEN, R/ECA PLEASE PASS TO A/S DINA POWELL, S/WE
PLEASE PASS TO SASHA MEHRA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/08/2031
TAGS: [KHIV](#) [KWMN](#) [PINR](#) [SA](#) [SOI](#)
SUBJECT: JEDDAH'S FIGHT AGAINST HIV/AIDS

REF: 04 RIYADH 006316

Classified By: Consul General Tatiana Gfoeller for reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (U) Summary. Jeddah's AIDS program coordinator described the HIV/AIDS problem and her efforts to improve the situation with awareness campaigns and treatment facilities for the infected. While Saudi Arabia's confirmed infection rate is relatively low, she is focused on getting more people tested and educating the young about the disease. The two major constraints for improving the HIV/AIDS problem in Jeddah are limited financial resources and confronting the social stigma of the disease. End Summary.

A PORTRAIT OF JEDDAH'S HIV/AIDS PROBLEM

12. (U) On June 21, Mrs. Oberwetter, PAO, and Pol/EconOffs met with Dr. Sanaa Mustafa ((FELIMBAN)), the coordinator of HIV/AIDS programs in the Jeddah and Mecca regions (reftel) as well as Director of King Saud Hospital in Jeddah. She had just concluded a two day conference on AIDS in the Kingdom where she was the only female participant. Felimban remarked that while Saudi Arabia's HIV/AIDS infection rate is comparatively low, she believes there are at least ten cases that have not been reported for every known case because people are not getting tested. (Note: The English language Saudi Gazette recently reported that Saudi Arabia has the second largest population of AIDS patients in the Arab world. End Note.) While the majority of the infected are expatriates, Felimban estimates about 15 percent are Saudi and that every three days another person is infected.

13. (U) Seventy percent of the Kingdom's HIV/AIDS patients are in Jeddah, according to Felimban. Of the infected, Feliemban estimates about 85 percent contract HIV through sexual contact, 12 percent as the infection is passed from mother to child, and the rest from drug use. More of the Kingdom's population is being screened for HIV with testing done before iqamas (national id card) are issued, inmates go to prison, mothers give birth, or operations are performed. She said that most Saudis (both male and female) living in the cities have access to condoms, but the use of condoms by Saudis is very rare. Moreover, Bedouins living outside of urban areas do not even know what condoms are.

TREATMENT EFFORTS AND PARTNERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

14. (U) Currently, Felimban is treating 500 patients with

antiretroviral medication and she thinks that Saudi Arabia has enough medicine to treat patients. She also runs a HIV/AIDS treatment program that gives medical, psychological, and financial support to patients where much of the program is focused on treating patients' depression. The clinic offers group counseling so patients can support one another through their illness and offers testing to the public. The clinic is advertised via medical referrals and advertisements.

15. (C) Felimban told ConGenOffs that she does not get enough financial support from the government and private sector. She thinks the bureaucracy of the Ministry of Health prevents her from having total control over her AIDS program and she is thinking of appealing to King Abdullah for more money. She is also looking to get a sponsor to start an HIV/AIDS charity. (Note: ConGenOffs learned at a later date that Waleed bin Zager, a former Jeddah mayor and close contact of the CG, will be the head planning manager for the charity which should kick off before Ramadan in late September. End Note.) Felimban welcomed the PAO's suggestion to participate in the "Infectious Disease and HIV/AIDS" International Visitor Leadership Program. She is also ready to lead the Saudi side of a partnership with US organizations on awareness and research, modeled off the successful "US-Middle East Partnership on Breast Cancer Awareness and Research," a new initiative sponsored by the Department.

TRYING TO INCREASE AWARENESS IN THE ISLAMIC WORLD

16. (U) Felimban confirmed that HIV/AIDS is a taboo subject in the Kingdom but she has been successful in increasing AIDS awareness. Felimban's bold message to conservative Saudis is "your Islam does not provide immunity from HIV/AIDS." She has organized activities in observance of World AIDS Day in

JEDDAH 00000470 002 OF 002

December and had sermons preached in mosques about the importance of safe sex in marriage and the value of fidelity.

She is particularly focused on increasing awareness among the youth with advertisements in schools, distribution of HIV/AIDS information pamphlets, and AIDS awareness programs in schools. Felimban recognizes the importance for the Kingdom as a leader in the Muslim world, to speak out about HIV/AIDS as a problem for Muslims and would like to see more research done on AIDS in the Kingdom.

17. (U) In a separate meeting with Felimban, PAO introduced Dr. Majdi Al Tokhi, a consultant of infectious diseases and Deputy Executive Director of the Al Etkan Group. Felimban is now working with Tokhi to address HIV/AIDS issues in the Kingdom. This partnership has allowed Dr. Tokhi, who has studied in the US and has experience working with infectious diseases, to work with Felimban as a Ministry of Health official and bring both of their experiences working on infectious diseases from the public and private side together.

18. (C) Comment: Testing will probably continue to be Filemban's greatest challenge because of the stigma attached to HIV/AIDS. In Saudi Arabia's conservative society, getting tested would probably be viewed as confirmation that one is immoral and not following the teachings of Islam by engaging in drug use or "deviant" sexual behavior. Considering Jeddah is a major transit hub, facilitating the spread of infectious diseases, it is critical that testing become more accepted in Saudi society. The potential for the Department to partner with Dr. Felimban in the Kingdom is of particular importance, as Saudi Arabia is the focal point for 1.3 billion Muslims around the world, which will add credibility to the need for HIV/AIDS awareness among Muslim populations worldwide. End Comment.

19. (U) Bio Note: Felimban, who speaks excellent English, said that she was the first Saudi woman to become a director at a Saudi Hospital and the first woman to accompany the Minister of Health to the World Health Organization summit in Geneva

in 2004. She aspires to one day become Minister of Health. She mentioned that she was selected to head the HIV/AIDS program because the previous Health Minister "saw talent" and tapped her. She added that she thinks Health Minister Hamad al-Manai is a "good guy" who supports her efforts but does not have a large enough budget to meet the needs of the Kingdom. Felimban is 45 years old. She received a bachelor of the arts from King Abdul Aziz University College of Medicine in 1984. She then trained in internal medicine in Scotland and Saudi Arabia. She has worked at King Saud Hospital since 1990, primarily in the Immunity Department. She is also a talented sculptor and presented the PAO with an iron "self-sculpture" of a woman behind bars, as a visual proposal to the US Mission to help her in "taking down these bars for all Saudi women." She is working for women's rights and wants to be a model for promoting professional opportunities for Saudi women.

Gfoeller